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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: ADVISOR TO PRESIDENT BARZANI CITES
IMPROVED KRG RELATIONS WITH TURKEY

Classified By: Regional Coordinator Lucy Tamlyn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Kurdistan Region's chief advisor on Turkish matters believes that the recent killing of 15 Turkish soldiers by PKK forces increased public and military pressure on the Turkish government and so precipitated the revival of the dialogue between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). As a follow-up to their October 14 meeting in Baghdad, KRG President Barzani agreed to meet with Turkish Envoy Ozcelik and Foreign Policy Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu in Erbil on October 24 before traveling to the United States. Both sides have avoided pressing over-ambitious agendas in favor of moving slowly to establish better ties that could form the basis for future cooperation.
End summary.

¶2. (C) The Deputy Team Leader (DTL) of the U.S. Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) met with Safeen Dizayee, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) International Relations Chief and the party's primary advisor on Turkish matters on October 22 in his office. Dizayee recalled that KRG relations with Turkey had started off poorly this year with the Turkish ground forces' advance into Kurdish territory in February. The relationship had improved by May (partly due to Dizayee's behind-the-scenes work) when Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani met with Turkish envoy Ozcelik and Foreign Policy Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu. However the dialogue has not advanced during the five subsequent months.

¶3. (C) According to Dizayee, the PKK violence of October 4, in which 14 Turkish soldiers were killed, had increased domestic pressure on Turkish leaders. He said the Turkish "liberal media" attacked the military and accused them of ineptitude. After having been given the green light by parliament to conduct cross-border attacks, the military had still not been able to fulfill its promise to corner the PKK. This was responsible for the reinvigoration of the dialogue, Dizayee claimed, and the Turkish decision to hold the October 14 meeting between Ozcelik, Davutoglu and President Barzani in Baghdad. According to Dizayee, this was the first time Masoud Barzani had met with these officials since assuming the Presidency of the Kurdistan Region. The meeting itself had not been convened with any specific outcome in mind; rather it was agreed to consider a regular series of meetings and setting up smaller groups to look at different sectors.

¶4. (C) Dizayee commented that concerns on the part of Prime Minister Erdogan's party that it would fare poorly in municipal elections in May 2009 might also be a factor in the decision. Dizayee recalled that a recent visit by the Turkish Prime Minister to the country's southeastern region had been greeted by demonstrations and boarded up shops. Rapprochement with the Kurdistan Region might be viewed favorably by Turkish Kurds and help in the elections, he offered.

15. (C) Dizayee reported that on October 21 the Turkish National Security Council had blessed this approach and agreed that the dialogue with the KRG should continue with monthly meetings. A delegation from Turkey is expected on Friday, October 24 to meet with Barzani in Erbil before his visit to the United States. Dizayee reported these developments with satisfaction. According to him there had been a decision in Turkey to "get down to business -- with the military's blessing." Queried as to specific confidence building measures that might be on the table at these meetings, Dizayee said that nothing specific had been discussed. The task ahead is to persuade the PKK to agree to a cease-fire and disarmament. But, he stressed, this is a Turkish responsibility. Dizayee did mention that six weeks ago twenty PKK members had agreed to defect from the movement and had been given safe-haven in the Kurdistan Region.

16. (C) Asked how the renewed dialogue and possibly more aggressive steps against the PKK would resonate with Kurds in the Kurdistan Region, Dizayee stated that the public had an innate sympathy for the plight of the Turkish Kurds; it would not accept the KRG taking arms against the PKK -- but the KRG had no intention of waging war on any neighbors. It had assisted the Turks in the 90's and for its troubles had lost 3,000 pesh merga. Dizayee stated that there might be some political groups (such as the PCDK) which were more sympathetic to the PKK, but this was not an issue which would get the Kurdish populace out on the streets in protest. What might derail progress, however, would be another serious PKK attack which would force the Turkish military to take aggressive military action, he said.

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17. (C) Dizayee noted as well that any agreements with Turkey would be discussed and adopted by the Kurdistan Region High Political Council) a body composed of leaders of the major political parties. This body worked on the basis of consensus - issues are discussed and agreed between the governing coalition and "the opposition" before being introduced to the Kurdistan National Assembly. Achieving consensus in such a manner is one way of making the opposition "bear responsibility" according to Dizayee.

18. (C) Asked whether he thinks the Turkish government has taken meaningful steps to address the concerns of Turkish Kurds, Dizayee dismissed efforts to date by saying they had accomplished "perhaps 1 percent" of what was needed. He quickly added, however, that this was not a KRG issue and it would not get involved in internal matters of another country. He mentioned the problem of the Mahkmour refugee camp, which he believes should be closed. He acknowledged concerns that the camp has PKK members, and noted that it constitutes a "breeding ground" for young PKK sympathizers. If camp inhabitants can be encouraged to return to Turkey, and given incentives to do so, this would be a good sign.

19. (C) Dizayee informed DTL that there are no Turkish diplomatic representatives in the Kurdistan region, but they have had a military representative and an intelligence officer in the region since 1991. In addition, 1,200 Turkish soldiers have been stationed 40 kilometers inside the Kurdistan Region border since 1997. Turkey still does not recognize the entity known as the Kurdistan Region and the term of art which they insist on using is "the Northern Part of Iraq." Dizayee noted ruefully that any incoming shipments to the Turkish free port addressed to the "Kurdistan Region" ran the risk of being held up indefinitely.

110. (U) This cable has been cleared with Embassy Ankara.

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